The Social Significance of Smoking

or

To Smoke or not to Smoke: Is that Congestion?

In the past few years, virtually all of us have achieved a new identity: we have become either smokers or nonsmokers. Not because we acquired or resisted the practice of smoking that recently, but because we only now make it part of the way in which we define ourselves. Other definitions, such as Democrat and Republican, introvert and extrovert, have or have-not, were with us long before; but now there is this new identification in terms of smoke. What makes smoking so important that a nation can become categorized and divided by it? And if it is that important, why had we not noticed before now?

It is easy to reply that new research on health risks in smoking has given the practice such attention, but that in itself seems an inadequate explanation. We know well the risks of driving, but we do not think of ourselves as drivers and nondrivers. Something beyond the warnings of the surgeon general is at stake in this new cultural outlook. To discover what it is, we must first recognize that smoking is far more than a widespread personal habit. It is, rather, a cultural phenomenon with a long and rich history.

A brief look at that history will reveal that the world has been alternately divided into smokers and nonsmokers, or not so divided, depending on factors quite other than those directly related to the practice. But even before we try to understand the historical pattern of attitudes on smoking-- in order to make sense of the present-- we need to talk a

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little bit about the very basic, universal human behavior of social identity and division: the business of creating and maintaining boundaries.

Most of us can recall a kind of childhood game in which we drew the world around ourselves in ever widening circles: "I live at 213 High Street, Rockland Village, Marble County, Massachusetts, North America, the Western Hemisphere, the world, the solar system, the universe." Some kids could furnish more circles than others; all of us were building a model of even adult social reality. Everyone defines a circle of personal space, family space, friendship space, group identity space, and so on, in which boundaries other than geographical play most important roles. In each circle or space, certain things are shared with the common inhabitants while those outside the space are clearly identified as not belonging, even as being at variance with those inside.

Boundary systems are not unique to the human species. Research on animal territoriality has revealed how important boundaries are in sharing resources, establishing secure homes, protecting agaist attack, creating group identity and distinguishing other groups. Most animal and human conflicts develop over questions of boundary.

Ideas about space and boundaries are culturally determined and thus vary from society to society. If we compare, for example, the personal space, or distance, kept between two South Americans in conversation with that between two Canadians or Americans, we will see that the former stand much nearer one another. But the South American conversational distance makes a North American very uncomfortable, because it violates his own definition of personal space. In his book, The Hidden Dimension, Edward Hall points out how amusing it is to watch a South American backing a

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North American across the room as they talk-- each trying to achieve his preferred distance.

We speak of keeping "distance" (literally and figuratively) from those we do not like or trust, and of "getting close to" those with whom we welcome intimacy. A doctor keeps his "professional distance" from clients, just as a boss keeps "social distance" from workers. Upper class groups of people speak of "keeping out" social climbers. No visible lines mark the boundaries referred to in these examples, but they are certainly real to the participants. Just try to stand within fourteen inches of a casual acquaintance when in face-to-face conversation!

What has all this to do with smoking and its cultural history? It isn't hard to recognize our present conflicts over smoking space-- the expansion of "no smoking" territories; the expression of rights to a smoke-free atmosphere-- but their cultural significance is not so obvious. To see smokers and nonsmokers as different kinds of people, invading each other's territories, is a radically new phenomenon compared to earlier attitudes. Or is it?

Tobacco originated among Native Americans and spread to Europe almost as soon as Columbus' crews discovered it. In the native cultures it played highly symbolic roles, especially in religious, healing and peace rituals. The symbolism of tobacco had much to do with boundaries. The peace-pipe circle made friends of former enemies; ritual smoke brought unity between spirit and flesh in some cases and drove spirit (evil) from flesh in others; the proferred pipe symbolized inclusion of a stranger into the culture. Tobacco, in short, was a sacred substance with strong symbolism known to and respected by all members of the culture using it.

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Columbus' crews and their European followers to the New World were foreigners who did not understand the social boundary significance of tobacco. To them smoking was a strange but fascinating pagan practice. Its pleasant effects on consciousness drew them to it even while they considered it an evil narcotic. They justified taking it back to Europe by extolling its medicinal qualities. The first Spaniard bringing it into Spain was jailed by the Inquisition, but by the time he was released, the practice was already spreading into his culture.

Smoking caught on throughout Europe, becoming especially rampant in England. None of its sacred symbolism came with it except the idea of its purifying and healing properties. In Elizabethan England its praises were sung widely in literature. The odor of horses was purged from churches by tobacco; schoolboys were instructed to smoke that their lungs might be purified against disease; ladies' breath was considered sweeter for the smoke upon it. Virtually every man, woman and child took up smoking.

Then tobacco began to acquire boundary symbolism in its new domain. With the restoration of monarchy in 1660, the exile king Charles II returned from France to reestablish court in England. Into the smoke-ridden atmosphere there, he brought dainty French habits of fancy dress and snuffing-- a smokeless version of tobacco use. The new court symbolized its status by its French manner and custom. It was particularly important to establish social boundaries between the court and others, for at this time a rising middle and upper class threatened the power of monarchy. Aristocratic land owners had been forced by taxation and penalty to sell their property cheaply to tenant and freehold farmers, who thereby acquired

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wealth rapidly and moved upward socially. A new merchant class grew up around trade with the colonies-- largely in the tobacco that had become so popular. We find Trevelyan writing of the times: "... the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe." His intent was to show the need for putting the nouveau riche rabble in its place-- to establish boundaries.

Imagine a newly rich merchant or country gentleman puffing his pipe and asking to be admitted to court, where elegant men in silk and lace daintily took their snuff from jewelled boxes. Their ostentatious style and turned-up noses made the presence of smoke, or even its smell on the intruder's clothing, a clear violation of class boundary.

Outside the court, however, tobacco was a symbol of free speech, as Trevelyan also noted: "... universal liberty of speech of the English nation, uttered amid clouds of tobacco smoke with equal vehemence whether against the Government and the Church, or against their enemies, had long been the wonder of foreigners...." The rising upper classes, with status below that of courtiers, also had to dissociate themselves from the common people who threatened their growing security.

The upper classes thus developed their own lifestyle-- one of rigid moral code and manner we still know as "Victorian." The ladies were not permitted to smoke, however much they may have envied their poorer and freer sisters, but, in turn, they gained status symbolized by the pure air of their drawing rooms. Their men, unwilling to give up the pipe, were assigned to special smoking rooms by the ladies, and made to wear smoking jackets and ornate smoking caps to keep their other dress and elaborate hairdos free of contamination. Those among their children who rejected the new class distinctions and customs became Bohemians and smoked in the

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streets and coffeehouses with workers, soldiers (who had brought cigarettes to England after the Crimean War) and the lowest classes. Thus smoking patterns became symbolic of an entire social order, each class distinguished by its particular habits of-- and attitudes toward-- tobacco use.

As Victorian puritanism in morals and behavior gradually gave way to modernization, with its freer lifestyles, the rigid strictures on smoking were relaxed. Men emerged from their smoking rooms and women, as they achieved greater independence, were seen smoking in public. Their behavior again symbolized, in smoke, the changing boundary rules of their society.

Tobacco use in the Colonies, too, symbolized cultural patterns, along both geographic and religious lines for the most part. In the South, tobacco achieved great economic importance; Virginia, particularly, would have failed without this export crop, from which James II, despite his public censure of it, also profited enormously. Domestic consumption of tobacco flowed naturally from its positive economic aura. The liberal Southern atmosphere of agricultural growth presented little opposition to tobacco use.

Not so in the North, where tobacco played no economic role and puritanism held strong. But while preachers denounced the pipe, along with all other pleasures, smoking spread through the Northern culture. By Connecticut law, smoking was prohibited under the age of twenty-one and in streets, highways and barnyards. Where it was permitted, smokers had to produce doctors' certificates stating its benefits and be licensed by a court. In Boston tobacco use in meeting houses, presumably Quaker, incurred fines. Yet history tells us that many parsons joined their peers in congenial smoke.

The cigar store Indian began to appear in America around the mid-nineteenth century and even the well-bred were smoking widely and publicly. Mrs. Andrew

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Jackson and Mrs. Zachary Taylor, as First Ladies, were ardent pipe smokers, and Charles Dickens reported, from his travels, that ladies-- old and young-- smoked openly in the company of gentlemen.

Domestic tobacco manufacture mushroomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially when cigarettes appeared on the scene. Thus the North became economically involved (growing also spread in that direction, Connecticut pipe tobacco being particularly prized). A resurgence of puritan reaction accompanied this trend, but by the twenties, cigarette smoking was a widely popular symbol of sophistication. Only a decade or two ago, in many American communities, it was the nonsmoker-- especially a boy growing to manhood-- who was considered maladjusted.

An overview of these historical patterns reveals an ebb and flow of tobacco use that is strongly symbolic of social identity within and among groups. When society is rigidly structured, as among Native Americans, Victorians and Puritans, smoking behavior identifies social boundaries. When such boundaries relax, as with the Elizabethans and recent modern culture in England and America, smoking becomes more universal and represents few boundaries beyond the identification of congenial circles or a few "off-limit" situations, such as church and social events just too formal for such camaraderie.

What, then, are we to make of the present conflict between smokers and nonsmokers? Certainly social boundaries are being drawn more and more clearly between them, and invasion of each others' space is becoming more and more of an issue. Similar issues of intrusion arose when the British gentry invaded court with their offensive pipes or puritan domains were violated, but in these historical situations smoking was a behavior assoc-

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iated with a group and not the name of the group itself. Smokers have now achieved identification by the practice itself, as have nonsmokers by their abstinence and opposition to it. If we make the reasonable assumption that smoking, as throughout its history, symbolizes cultural divisions, we must look for something that smoking represents today-- some important new cultural division represented by smoking and nonsmoking.

On the surface we see a hue and cry among nonsmokers-- original and converted-- about cancer threats and about the smoker's inconsiderate behavior, weak character, nervous dependency and so on. If we look beyond the personal aspects of these attacks, we find the nonsmoker less concerned with individual welfare than with the broader social issue of a right to clean air. The nonsmoker's objection really has to do with perception of tobacco smoke as pollution in his or her environment.

Now as soon as we identify pollution as the main issue, we can easily relate the smoking problem to a host of other pollution problems in our society today. And we need hardly be told what they are in an era of environmental concern that has already produced industrial restrictions, lead-free gas, pesticide- and additive-free foods, media smog indices, etc. A generation ago, we felt the threat of atomic warfare in our very bones and smoked away with impunity-- perhaps, in part, to relieve the tension. Today the unseen-- for the most part-- threat hangs literally in the air we breathe, and tobacco smoke makes that threat at least symbolically visible.

Among the agents of pollution in our air, it is unlikely that tobacco smoke plays a very significant role. The urban nonsmoker still has much to contend with in the way of serious threat! But smoking is immediate and visible. Television news has to reveal the pollution count, but cigarette smoke in

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the immediate environment speaks clearly. It is a symbol with a powerful message of danger-in-the-air. And because the symbol has so much meaning, it becomes easy to believe that an end to smoking will somehow be an end to all pollution in the air. Besides, it is far easier to attack one's relatives, friends and co-workers on the issue of smoking than to try to stop the major agents of pollution.

Some years ago, when environmental campaigns began in earnest, an impressive and expensive exhibit was displayed at The American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Horrifying visions of garbage, litter, runny-eyed choking crowds and other dismaying scenes were shown within a sophisticated architectural enclosure built for the occasion. Thousands of visitors trudged through it daily, shaking their heads. Just before they exited, each was confronted by a mirror over which Pogo announced: "We have seen the enemy, and it is us." At the same time, an ominous voice from the walls spoke: "Don't drop that candy wrapper...."

If one chanced to look up at the sky on leaving the museum, one could not fail to see that building's own smokestack belching black soot all over upper Manhattan. Yet people left feeling their candy wrappers were destroying their world and their futures. Such focus on individual behavior has been used more than once, in recent years, to obscure the larger enemy. But like the campaign against littering, the campaign against smoking will not clean up our world.

Yet the symbolic importance of that campaign reveals the nature of our "new puritanism." The pollution-free environment has become a moral, in addition to a health, issue. Smoking is not a class or religious boundary issue any more; it is the issue that divides those who care about a decent,

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healthy, secure human future from those who don't. That, at least, is the way in which the lines are increasingly being drawn.

Unfortunately this division may have the same effects as other historical "divide and conquer" campaigns. A great many smokers, unwilling to give up their practice, are nevertheless concerned with larger pollution issues. If they are identified as the real enemy, their energies will be devoted to self-defense and distracted from more important campaigns, appropriately waged in concert with nonsmokers.

It has been suggested, in fact, that the nonsmoking campaign could increase its success by emphasizing clean air instead of disparaging the smoker for his or her habit. If this occurs, the symbolic message will be clearer than it has been, but the underlying issue, as we have said, may grow further from resolution. No previous historical attempt to eliminate smoking has succeeded. Its positive social meanings, for "those who do," are probably more powerful than any opposition can cope with. Smoking is symbolic of social relaxation, growing up, independence--"You've come a long way, Baby-- and the often needed break that lowers anxiety or permits a moment of time out in decision-making and argument. The offer or taking of a cigarette is an immediate ice-breaker with strangers, bringing the smoker within the boundaries of a new circle. Nowadays, in a culture of violence and risk-taking, even the health campaign against smoking may be perceived as an interesting challenge to many youth who remain unconcerned with the new puritanism and even wish to dissociate themselves from it.

However we feel about it, smoking is likely to stay with us. There may be changes in established patterns, to be sure-- perhaps marijuana will be legalized and will replace much cigarette smoking; perhaps smoking in public buildings will be drastically reduced, at least for a time; per-

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haps we will be so overwhelmed by the expanding list of other cancer-linked agents that smoking seems comparatively nonthreatening. What really matters is that we become aware of what is going on; especially of the powerful social symbols of inclusion and exclusion given to smoking all through history. Then, and only then, will we understand what lines we want to draw, what battles we want to fight, and-- hopefully-- how to win them.

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